

Cormorant Management Plans for Lake Huron 2006



There are two major nesting sites for double-crested cormorants on the Michigan side of Lake Huron: Les Cheneaux Islands, and the islands of the Thunder Bay area. A secondary breeding area is the Charity Islands in outer Saginaw Bay. The number of breeding cormorants in the Les Cheneaux and Thunder Bay islands has risen from less than 1,000 breeding-age birds in the late 1980s to over 8,000 today. Another 5,000 to 10,000 immature birds use these archipelagos as feeding areas.

Consumption of fish by cormorants now equals or exceeds total fish production of waters adjacent to Les Cheneaux and Thunder Bay, leaving little for recreational fishing. In the Les Cheneaux area, yellow perch abundance, and in Thunder Bay, brown trout and other fish abundance, declined during the period of cormorant population growth. By the year 2000, cormorants consumed approximately 18% of alewife production in Lake Huron. There are concerns that cormorant predation could be making inroads into whitefish, yellow perch, and smallmouth bass reproduction.

The United States Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Services Program, and the Michigan DNR have collaborated in order to learn whether cormorant management can produce measurable benefits to fisheries in these two locations. In the Les Cheneaux Islands, responses of yellow perch and other species will be measured as Wildlife Services reduces the number of nesting birds. Yellow perch have been reproducing well for many years, but since the early 1990s the number of young perch surviving to 8 inches or larger – the size most desirable to recreational fishers – has declined sharply. Survival of perch should recover as cormorant numbers come down. In the Thunder Bay area, the lead concern has been declining brown trout survival. Brown trout continue to reach large sizes in Thunder Bay but since the early 1990s fewer and fewer brown trout are surviving the first year after stocking. If cormorants have been eating a large proportion of the stocked fish, post stocking survival of brown trout should improve as

cormorant numbers decline. In addition, we hope to see revival of yellow perch, whitefish, and smallmouth bass fisheries in Thunder Bay. Fishery monitoring will help managers decide what, if any, level of cormorant nesting is compatible with fishery goals for these two important sites in Lake Huron.



Cormorants feeding on recently stocked brown trout at the Alpena breakwall. Cormorants are believed to have contributed to the collapse of the brown trout fishery in Thunder Bay.



Cormorant fledglings ready to leave Scarecrow Island, Thunder Bay. Notice the damage to vegetation caused by the guano of these birds. In 2005, 3,710 adult birds nested on this island.